

# The Franks: From Clovis to Charlemagne

## World History Lecture Notes



### The Fall of Rome

After the Fall of the Roman Empire left Western Europe in chaos, the **Franks** rose to prominence to fill the power vacuum in the Early Middle Ages and had a lasting effect on the development of Western Europe.

Ever since Julius Caesar's conquest of Gaul in the first century B.C., the Romans had ruled the area that is today France, Switzerland, and Belgium. In the fifth century A.D., the Roman Empire was crumbling and failing to defend itself against invasions by barbarian tribes. In 455, the **Vandals** sacked Rome, pillaging the city so thoroughly that the term, vandalism, had become synonymous with the destruction of property. In **476 A.D.**, Rome was conquered by barbarian invaders and several tribes, including the Vandals, the Ostrogoths, the Visigoths, and the Franks, divided the spoils. Over the following three centuries, the Franks would come out on top, building an empire that stretched from present-day Spain to present-day Germany.

### Clovis and the Rise of the Frankish Kingdom

In 509, **Clovis I** became the first King of the Franks, unifying the allied Frankish tribes under one leader. In addition to conquering new territories, expanding the Frankish Kingdom to cover most of present-day France, Clovis also converted to **Catholic Christianity** (as opposed to Arian Christianity, which taught that Jesus was not fully God) after crediting Jesus Christ with a victory in a hard-fought battle. Today, France gets its name from the Franks and Catholicism remains the nation's predominant religion, making Clovis a very important and influential figure in French history.

Over the following two centuries, the Frankish Kingdom grew powerful – powerful enough to halt the expansion of the Islamic **Caliphate** which had conquered the entirety of North Africa and Spain. In 732, **Charles Martel** commanded the victorious Frankish army in the decisive **Battle of Tours**, which halted the Caliphate's expansion and cemented the Frankish Kingdom's place as Western Europe's preeminent power. In recognition of his victory, Charles was given the honorific nickname, "the Hammer."

### The Carolingian Dynasty

Charles Martel's son, **Pepin the Short**, overthrew the Frankish king, **usurping** the throne with the Pope's blessing, establishing the **Carolingian Dynasty** (The House of Charles). The close ties between the Franks and the Papacy would continue into the reign of Pepin's son, Charles the Great, popularly remembered by his French name, **Charlemagne**. Charlemagne expanded the Frankish Kingdom through military conquests, including a campaign into Italy to assist the Pope against his enemies. In appreciation for Charlemagne's support, the Pope crowned him "Emperor of the Romans" in 800. A thousand years later, Napoleon, the Emperor of France, would honor Charlemagne in the iconic series of paintings by Jacques-Louis David of Napoleon Crossing the Alps. Etched into the stones in the bottom left corner of the painting are Napoleon's name, along with the names of Hannibal, who had crossed the Alps to attack Rome, and Charlemagne (written in Latin as KAROLVS MAGNVS), who had crossed the Alps to help the Pope and expand the Frankish Empire into Italy – just as Napoleon was, at the time, expanding the French Empire into Italy.

At the time of Charlemagne's death, the Frankish Empire was the most powerful political entity in Europe, rivaling the Byzantine (or Eastern Roman) Empire and the Islamic Caliphate in power. However, it was not to last. Charlemagne's empire was divided between his sons after his death and after a series of civil wars, the Frankish Empire was formally divided by the Treaty of Verdun in 843 and it would never be reunited. The Western Europe of the High Middle Ages would not be governed as a centralized state, but as a patchwork quilt of feudal kingdoms where local lords held more authority than the kings to whom they swore allegiance. But the Franks were not without impact. They laid the foundation for the Kingdom of France, secured the Pope's position as the leader of Christians in Western Europe, and led indirectly to the medieval institution of a Holy Roman Empire ruled by Germans.